

Reformation Sunday

*“How Much Should I Give?”*

October 25, 2008

In our Gospel lesson today for Reformation Sunday, we listen to Jesus addressing the Jews who believed in him. Jesus says: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

For Martin Luther, the truth about God’s grace came to him in a definitive way, as he studied and read the Scriptures. His theological basis was from Paul’s letter to the Romans 3:24 – *“we are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* Luther became totally convinced . . . that God loves us more than anything we can ever know or imagine! For Luther, the unbelievable experience of God’s grace in his life was so overwhelming that he could not fathom it. For Luther and for us, as Lutherans . . .

- The truth is that God’s grace is absolutely the most powerful force in the world.
- The truth is that we are important and special to God, so much so that God was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for us – his son, Jesus Christ – for the sins of the world!
- But the truth also is that we are enslaved to sin, to the power of sin, and to the temptations and desires of the world.
- The truth is that we are enslaved, even when we don’t want to admit it and even when we don’t want to acknowledge it!

I believe that one of the most insidious expressions of this enslavement in our culture and society today is the ways in which we are enslaved to our money – whether it be too much or not enough, the enslavement is real.

Our latest economic crisis is simply one more indicator of the extent to which we are enslaved by the power and influence of money. Consider the massive effect of our recent economic crisis and the affect it has had on the psyche of millions of people during these last weeks, affecting not only their financial health, but their emotional health, their spiritual health, their relationship health, their physical health.

This week the NY Times carried a feature on people not taking their prescriptions because of the economic impact – prescription drug sales down 13% in the last 3 months – people getting physically sick – people doing things they would not ordinarily do, all related back to the economic crisis and the impact of money.

The impact of money literally envelopes and controls us in ways that are enslaving. We are not free to be the people God wants us to be! And the more we focus on the economic crisis, the more we talk about it, the more it impacts our lives . . . what we do or don’t do, what we spend or don’t spend, what we save or don’t save . . . the economic realities can totally immobilize us in ways that we become fearful and afraid to do anything. The credit crisis, the stock market plunge, is that not that there is no money – it’s based on a fear of losing whatever it is that we think we have left! The power of money can enslave us!

So what is the answer to slavery? How does one break the shackles of slavery? And maybe even more importantly, how do we break free when we have a problem admitting we are enslaved in the first place?

Jesus makes a simple statement in our Gospel. . . **Continue in my word . . . When you do that, you will know the truth . . . and the truth will make you free!**

During World War II, an insightful story was shared by some sailors who served in the Pacific theater of operations. It has to do with how natives on a particular South Pacific island captured monkeys. What happened is that the natives would take earthen jars with long narrow necks and secure them to the trees that were the habitat of the monkeys. Then they would fill those jars with grain. At night the monkeys came down from the trees and reached into the jars to get the grain; but when they tried to take their hands out of the jars, they found it impossible because they had a fistful of grain.

All the monkeys needed to do was to turn loose the grain, but this they refused to do. So they lost their freedom rather than turn loose their little fistful of grain.

And so, like trapped monkeys, so many of us would rather hold on to our money and miss the kingdom . . . than turn them loose and experience the freedom and joy of truly living in God's love and grace. We are tied to our money. We can't "let go!"

The simple antidote to our enslavement to money and the power of money in our psyche is to begin giving some of it away! That sounds odd! If I'm afraid I won't have enough, why would I even think about giving some of that away?

When we learn to give . . . when we learn to be a giver rather than a taker . . . when we learn the truth that giving is a whole lot more freeing than keeping . . . we will know the truth and the truth will make us free!

In the final chapter of Mark Allan Powell's book, *GIVING TO GOD*, addresses the question: How much should I give? How much is enough? What does it take to help us to break free from the enslavement of money in our lives?

A church consultant by the name of Andy Williams recently wrote an article in *Leadership Network Advance*, where he featured leaders of a number of churches that were striving to encourage their fellow members **to adopt a lifestyle of giving**, rather than to be simply once-in-awhile givers. He called it **GENEROUS LIVING**.

He suggested two things that must be done in order for the congregation to embrace this lifestyle of generosity.

- **First, (he said)** churches must realize that **generous living** starts with the leaders of the church. Church leaders must model Biblical stewardship and generosity themselves. If congregations are going to adopt this new lifestyle, they must see their leaders buy into it and live it.

Being told to be generous without a visible model to follow, congregation members feel lost and aggravated. They need to see how generosity is practically lived out so that they can know how to do the same.

- **Second (he said)**, churches must recognize that **generous living** is a topic that knows no age limit or economic status. It has nothing to do with your income level. It has to do with your distribution level.

In other words, churches have to recognize that all of us are in varying financial crisis or abundance and, therefore, stewardship teaching must reach people across the economic spectrum. To enable generous giving, the concept of giving has to be front and center and part of one's everyday life.

You all remember the parable of the Widow's mite that Jesus told in the Bible! Well, according to a new report from Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion, just released this past month, the parable is still accurate. The study indicated that of all the demographic groups in the population, guess what group is the most likely of all groups to tithe their income to the church! The WIDOWS.

The Baylor study, published in a book called *What Americans Really Believe*, found that over 20% of widows, tithe. That compares with only 8.6% of men and women who haven't lost spouses. Widowers are not far behind, with 17% of them tithing. And overall, widows and widowers give more than the average churchgoer, donating 8% of their income to the church.

An example would be Janet Muse, age 83, a member of Inglewood United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. She has been tithing for years, calling it a matter of gratitude . . . says it hasn't always been easy. Her husband died when he was 37, leaving her to raise three kids on her own. "*We had a roof over our heads, and most of what we needed, but not much of what we wanted.*" These days, Muse lives off of Social Security and other retirement income, but she still tithes. She uses a wheelchair, but still drives herself to church for worship and volunteer work.

What are the factors that impact these results? In the Baylor study, they found that these older women, and widows in particular, reported **high rates of church attendance and a very strong sense of belief**. Those were the two factors specifically that led to generosity.

Another interesting finding from the Baylor survey was that lower income people were often are more generous proportionately than the those of higher incomes. In fact one startling statistic indicated that if, all of a sudden the entire population of the United States went on welfare and received the average monthly check and then gave 10% of that to the church. The budget of the average congregation in the United States would more than double.

So how much do you give? What is the right amount? What is the right number for you? How do you decide?

Many congregations (and St. John's is no different) encourage the spiritual discipline of TITHING. So what is that and where did it come from? I knew I was in trouble one day, when a member of a church I served in Nebraska, asked me one day, "What's a tither?"

- In Genesis 14:17-20, there is the story of Abraham and the priest Melchizedek. In that story, Abraham gave 1/10 of the spoils he had won in battle to that priest!
- In Genesis 28:18-22, Jacob promised to give God 1/10 of all the material blessings he received.
- Later in history, the Israelites established religious laws, based on the traditions of these patriarchs, to dedicate 1/10 of certain belongings to the support of the temple, their religious institutions and other causes.
- Over the years, the actual practice of tithing was modified, regarding which items were subject to the tithe, to whom the tithe was to be paid, and to what use the tithe should be put . . . but the tradition of 1/10 remained very consistent!
- In Malachai 3:8-10, the prophet berated the Israelites for "robbing God" when they failed to bring their full tithes to the temple in Jerusalem.
- Jesus himself seems to have supported the concept of tithing as an outward sign of righteousness, but warned against a prideful attitude of self-righteousness.
- And the Apostle Paul, from his Jewish tradition, encouraged the practice, but also encouraged proportionate giving, cheerful giving – as he says in II Corinthians 8:12 *"if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable on the basis of what one has, not on what one doesn't have."*

Have you heard the story of the pastor who served a church that had a reputation for being very tight with their money and with their giving. He decided that it was time to do something drastic in order to teach the congregation the importance of giving. So he contacted an electrician and had all of the pews wired.

The next Sunday was Pledge Sunday, where traditionally the congregation had taken up pledges from the people at the worship service. The Pastor stood up and made the following announcement. *"From now on instead of putting your pledges in sealed envelopes and turning them into the church office all pledges will be made publicly during the worship service."* Then he said, *"So let's get started . . . All of you who will pledge to give ten dollars a week, please stand up."*

As soon as he said this, he pushed a button that the electrician had installed in the pulpit and it sent a jolt of electricity through the wires and into the pews. Immediately about one half of the congregation jumped to their feet.

The pastor reached down and adjusted a knob on the podium and then said, "*All you who will pledge to give twenty dollars a week please stand.*" And a second stronger volt of electricity caused several more people to rise to their feet. This whole process was repeated several times. And each time the pledge amount was raised, along with the voltage. The ushers had to work fast just to record all of the names and pledges.

After the service the pastor and his staff were busy adding up the totals and congratulating themselves on the great success of the annual stewardship campaign— However, their enthusiasm ended abruptly, when one of the Deacons opened the door and announced that **four church members had been electrocuted because they refused to stand up!**

Powell's insight is excellent as he encourages us to consider tithing as a guideline, not a requirement. And that is certainly in keeping with the Reformation theme of grace. To make tithing a law, nullifies the grace that is ours through Jesus Christ. As Luther maintained in his classic affirmation: we are saved by grace, not by works of the law! But to use tithing as a guide and direction makes all the sense in the world. How much should I give? That's up to you and God. Let the grace of God take hold of you. Let it surround you and envelope you and guide you. It works every time!